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MARITIME ASPECTS OF HOMERIC GREECE

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Homer is in a sense a child of the sea. The language of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* abounds in allusions to the sea and sea life. One of the six nouns most common to the Homeric vocabulary is *νηῦς*. But a knowledge of, and love for, the sea on the part of a poetic genius is no proof that the Homeric Greeks, as a people, were bold mariners. What a contrast between the glorious sea poetry of Homer and (excepting the expedition to Troy) the maritime characteristics of the Achaeans, which he depicts! Much error still obtains concerning the character and extent of Homeric Greek nautical enterprise. That enterprise, typically regarded, was of narrow range. It is admitted at once that by far the largest number of ships referred to by Homer are Grecian.

Of course, in a sense, and a most important one, Homer is History. Our expanded knowledge of the Homeric age remarkably justifies Thucydides in regarding the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as essentially historical. We do not overlook the Homeric expedition to Troy. The return from Troy was not commercially typical, where reflecting fact at all, as a careful examination of the text will demonstrate. The reference (γ 301) to the ships of Menelaus laden with goods is non-typical. What a perilous adventure that was! The Taphian mariners were probably not Greeks, but, contrary to general assumption, descendants of a westerly colony of Phoenicians and imbued with some maritime traits of their fathers.

The Homeric Greeks built a fleet in preparation for the Trojan War, animated by a similar impulse to that of the Romans in creating a sufficient navy in order to cope with the Carthaginians. Both efforts were then hitherto unprecedented in the annals of Greece and Rome. What a tremendous incentive is war! What unparalleled efforts in American history are put forth in our own land in this very hour, impelled by war! So in principle regarding

those 1,186 Greek ships that sailed to Troy. But the journey to Troy offered no such obstacles to the Homeric Greeks as did navigation to some other ἀπὸς γαίης. Troy was comparatively near, and with intervening isles. The Greek victory at Troy was barren; see γ 130, 175, ε 108, τ 597, ω 27. That victory was worse than barren. How consistent is the national decline of Homeric Greece which followed the Trojan War, with all the inferences of tradition! After Troy, the Achaeans had not sufficient vitality to expel the constantly pressing Dorians in the Peloponnesus, within a century of the sacking of "that evil Ilios never to be named" (τ 597). The Achaean land never recovered from that adversity intimated by old Nestor: "ὦ πόποι, ἦ μέγα πένθος Ἀγαῖδα γαῖαν ἰκάνει (A 254). It is no surprise then to find in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* no allusion to a notable foreign commerce in Greek bottoms. We cannot infer, as Dr. Leaf does, that because the Homeric Greeks transported an army to Troy they also conducted a notable foreign commerce.¹ In this, "Homer can only be interpreted by Homer."

How small a Greek ship was! Merchant ships had twenty oarsmen (ι 322). The war ships of Achilles and Protesilaus had each fifty oarsmen (π 170, B 719). The war ships of the Boeotian contingent each had one hundred and twenty men (B 510); these were much larger than merchant ships. Compare these war ships with those of the later Greeks, the Carthaginians, and the Romans! And how utterly insignificant in size is the Homeric ship at Troy in comparison with those of the Egyptian Empire in its bloom. In a recent publication, A. Bothwell Gosse states, regarding the Egyptian men-of-war: "Rameses II had a fleet of four hundred on the Arabian Gulf. Some of the vessels were very large. He built one of cedar wood, 488 feet long; another, built much later, was three hundred feet long, forty-five feet wide, and sixty feet high."² Gosse adds: "One ship carried four thousand rowers, four hundred sailors, and three thousand soldiers"³—in other words, seven thousand four hundred men!

¹ *Classical Journal*, XIII, 68.

² *The Civilization of the Ancient Egyptians* (New York: Stokes Press), p. 27.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 28.

A Homeric ship with a hundred benches (*ἑκατόζυγος*) is mentioned as hyperbole (Υ 247). The almost constant use of oars on a voyage is shown by the expressions in which they are termed *πτηρὰ νηυσί*. Further proof of the small capacity of the Homeric boat and its inability to traverse safely wide stretches of sea is the availability of a mere inlet as a harbor (*λιμὴν*), so small was the ship. How small the *ἔκρια* of a Homeric ship; such was only fore and aft. How few provisions were carried aboard a Homeric ship (β 349, ε 265). That Homer never applies the term *ναυσικλυτός* to the Achaeans is not surprising; he reserves it for Phaeacians in fancy and Phoenicians in reality. The latter, of course, were the great carriers in the Mediterranean in the Homeric age. Nor is the epithet *φιλόηρετος* bestowed upon the Achaeans; it is given to the Phaeacians and Taphians. Nor is it remarkable that with such small ships the Homeric Greeks generally moored for the night. The ships of Odysseus are only open boats, with no arrangements of any sort for cooking or sleeping. The only night voyages willingly undertaken are those of Telemachus to Pylos and return (β 434, ο 296). The continuous voyages of Homeric mariners are usually short: that of Telemachus to Pylos required a single night (β 434, ο 296, 495); the voyage from Troy to Chrysa seems to have taken but a few hours (Α 472); on his return from Troy, Nestor spends the first night at Tenedos, fifteen miles distant; the second night at Lesbos, fifty miles from Tenedos. After mustering courage to cross the Aegean Sea (it is only about seventy-two English miles from Psyria to Cyme in Euboea), Nestor and his companions offer a sacrifice "for joy that we had measured out so great a stretch of sea" (γ 179)! The longest continuous voyage a Homeric Greek appears to have taken seems to have been from Crete to Egypt (ξ 257), and to have required four days' time. Of the voyage from Greece to Egypt, note especially the remark: "Thence not even the birds can make their way in a year, so great a sea it is and terrible" (*ἐπεὶ μέγα τε δεινὸν τε*); and, "None would hope in his heart to return . . . driven wandering into so wide a sea" (γ 319)! With what wonder or dread the Homeric mariner contemplates the great gulf of the sea (*μέγα λαίτμα θαλάσσης*) (δ 504); the perilous gulfs of the barren sea (*ὄς*

τε κατὰ δεινοὺς κόλπους ἄλδς ἀτρυγέτοιο) (ε 52) and see δ 510, 709, ε 175 (in this line how typical to call the sea δεινόν τ' ἀργαλέον τε!), 223, 409, 563, η 734, ν 264 (among others). Especially note the fact that the Homeric Greeks could not sail against the wind, as is shown in their prolonged stay at the Isle of the Sun in μ 326 and 400. Above all things, the Homeric mariner dreads ἐπείγῃ ἴς ἀνέμου! It is no surprise then that Agamemnon, on his return from Troy, adopts the longer route, sailing past Malea, that he may be comparatively near shore all the way (δ 514)! For some other typical experiences see ε 299 f., ι 62 f., κ 48 f., μ 42 f.

Homer applies the term ἔφαλος to coast towns (B 538, 584), but how insignificant are Homeric Kerinthos and Helos in comparison with then notable Greek cities, such as Mycene, Orchomenos, and Thebes; Corinth, for peculiar geographical reasons, is an exception. And contrast that maritime inconsequence with the fact that most of the great Greek cities of the "historical" period were either ἔφαλος or ἀγχίαλος.

And the testimony of the *Iliad* is consistent with that of the *Odyssey*. We have already referred to the expedition of the 1,186 ships to Troy. How glaring is the rule in the *Iliad* concerning Greek ships in contrast to the single exception! Note that no ship is portrayed upon the shield of Achilles, which is typical of Greek life! No scene on the shield is ἀλλοδαπός to Greek life. Why then should the shield be considered as of foreign design, simply because it omits ships? Greek maritime life had not become of sufficient importance to be typified upon the shield.

Temesa (probably in Bruttium) is the destination of the Taphian ship in quest of copper (α 184). In ω 211 the aged servant of Laertes is a Sicilian woman (γυνή Σικελή) and in ν 383 the Sicilians are mentioned as slave traders; no more is heard of that race; no one even knows whether it had yet come to dwell on that glorious isle of Sicily. But assume that Bruttium and Sicily are intended by Homer; they are the only two references to any now positively identified foreign land of the West. Even on that assumption it may be well disputed that such intercourse was in Greek ships, as hereinbefore intimated. Many theories have been evolved of a notable western commerce in Greek ships in the time of Homer.

Such theories, however, presuppose a much later date for the composition of the *Odyssey* than is warranted. The Homeric poems were composed within a century of the fall of Troy. Homer was contemporary with the age which he depicts.

Concerning the Euxine, the case seems clear that in the time of Homer this sea was unknown to Greek ships; see my article on "The Leaf-Ramsey Theory of the Trojan War" in *Classical Journal* of April, 1917. That sea is not even named by Homer! He refers in λ 13 to Scythia (called *κιμμερίων δῆμος*) as being at "the limits of the world" ('Η δ' ἐς πείραθ' ἵκανε βαθυρρόου Ὠκεανοῖο).

But what about the earlier invasion of Egypt by the Greeks in a pre-Homeric age? And what about the Egyptian influence upon Greek civilization—an influence which was hoary in the time of Homer? Many writers accept such an invasion as an unquestionable fact. But such is not established. Near the close of the Nineteenth Egyptian Dynasty the Libyans invaded Egypt. Among their allies were the Edwesh.¹ It is but a suggestion that these were Achaiaans—no proof that they were. Early in the Twentieth Dynasty another Libyan invasion of Egypt occurred, and their allies were the "peoples of the sea." Included with the latter were the Peleset (Cretans). And among other allies of the Libyans on that invasion were the Denyen;² were they the Danaans? Grant that the Greeks did invade Egypt on both occasions. They probably did so as mercenaries. Homer reverences the past. Had those expeditions been noteworthy he would have honored such Grecian achievements. Such expeditions were under the auspices of Crete, if they occurred at all. The present generation has thrown a flood of light upon the astonishing civilization of *Κρήτην ἐκατόμμουλιν*, a deeply impressive and noble progenitor of Homeric Culture. Cretan civilization was yet in its bloom, though nearing its nadir, at the time of those invasions. The Greeks then went to Egypt in Cretan ships. They had not then learned the business of seafaring. As Bury observes,³ it took the Greeks "many ages" to learn that trade after they had

¹ *Encyc. Brit.* (11th ed.), IX, 85.

² *Ibid.*

³ *History of Greece*, chap. i, sec. 10, p. 76.

reached the coasts of the Aegean Sea. In the time of Homer they had not yet become eminent in seafaring. Both Cretan and Egyptian ships had long visited the northern shores of the Mediterranean. Recall the old sea kings of Crete. Minos, says Thucydides,¹ founded the first maritime empire. It was worthy of that grand entrepôt of three continents, Crete. Those Achaïans who visited Egypt, true to their old hereditary northern spirit, in contrast to the more peaceful, primeval races of the Mediterranean, were then, as later, deserving of that epithet given them in the Homeric poems, *πολιπόρθιος*.

As already intimated, the intercourse between Homeric Greece and Phoenicia, coming down from immemorial times, was not by means of Greek ships.

In conclusion, in foreign commerce and in other foreign venture, apart from Troy, the Homeric marine was generally insignificant. In this "Homer can only be interpreted by Homer." Ingenious theories to the contrary have been widely accepted, a phenomenon which is easily explained in the very words of the inspired old Greek singer:

*τὴν γὰρ ἀοιδὴν μᾶλλον ἐπικλείουσ' ἄνθρωποι,
ἢ τις ἀκούοντεςσι νεωτάτῃ ἀμφιπέληται. (α 351)*

¹Book I. 4.